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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [PHUM](#) [CG](#) [BE](#)
SUBJECT: BELGIAN FOREIGN MINISTER REMAINS OPTIMISTIC ON EU
BRIDGING FORCE IN THE CONGO

Classified By: Deputy Political Economic Counselor Robert Kiene for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

¶1. (C) Summary: The Belgian MFA was optimistic the morning of December 12 that the EU would deploy an ESDP mission in Congo eventually, despite continued opposition from key member states. The MOD was less optimistic after French President Sarkozy's statement late afternoon that Europe cannot be everywhere and that African troops would be better. FM De Gucht made a strong plea for an ESDP bridging mission in Eastern Congo the first evening of the December 11-12 EU Summit. Countries in favor of a mission at a December 11 European meeting were Belgium, Sweden, Ireland, Finland and Spain. Countries opposed were the UK and Germany, and Sarkozy's comment indicates French opposition. The MFA is confident that Germany and probably UK opposition could be overcome. The Belgian strategy is to work through European channels the next few weeks to obtain support of all 27 member states or at least benign abstentions from those opposed. MOD De Crem went on the record for the first time December 10 in support of a Belgian contribution of 400-500 combat troops if an EU mission is deployed. The MOD diplomatic advisor was less optimistic that an EU force could be deployed after Sarkozy's statement. The Belgians will push again after Javier Solana returns from New York next week. End Summary.

Belgium and the EU: A Bridging Force is Possible

2.(C) According to MFA Congo Desk, FM De Gucht made a strong plea for EU action in Congo the first night (December 11) of the EU Summit in Brussels. The MFA counts Sweden, Ireland, Finland, and Spain in support of an EU bridging force in the Congo. The Swedes even asked why European Battle Groups exist if they are not going to be used. The United Kingdom and Germany are on the record as strongly opposed. The arguments against a bridging force now include not only that many European armed forces are already overstretched, but also that countries who want to help in East Africa could contribute to MONUC. A newer operational argument is that an EU force would introduce chain of command problems with two separate forces on the ground. Belgium has countered the command argument by saying that a UN resolution could define the separate roles and rules between MONUC and an EU force. Belgium has been supplying information about the humanitarian situation to Germany to counter arguments that the humanitarian crisis is not as serious as reported. Human Rights Watch is attempting to use the British press to influence public opinion and move the UK position. MFA contacts said the Belgians have already seen a weakening in German opposition and expect to see the prospects for a bridging force improve.

¶3. (C) Javier Solana and EU Commissioner Michel tabled a paper at the Summit on the political, technical and military

elements necessary for an EU bridging force. The paper was written to respond to UNSYG Ban's request for an EU force. The possible options include a full-fledged ESDP mission, an ad-hoc force, contributing forces to MONUC, and a "coalition of the willing" restricted in size. The general conclusion from the meeting was that further work was necessary and the EU would wait for Javier Solana to return from New York, where he will meet with UN officials Monday December 15. The discussion will then be taken up again in European circles.

MFA More Optimistic than MOD

14. (C) Noting that either the ESDP mission or a smaller force that uses EU infrastructure requires agreement from all 27 member states or at least benign abstentions, the Belgians plan to work through EU channels to move member states towards action. Their lobbying of the Germans and their insistence that the humanitarian situation requires a response seems to be paying off. The Germans are wary of putting boots on the ground, which would require approval from the Bundestag, but the Belgians believe they can prevent an absolute German no. They also anticipate a softening in the British position after the press efforts of Human Rights Watch. The MFA goal was to find a country to lead the force (possibly Italy or Greece, who take over the European battlegroups in the New Year) to rally other countries who wish to contribute to bring the troop contingent up to about 3,000, and to prevent vetoes by other member states. Belgium could contribute troops for a period of about four months, possibly assigned to protecting Goma airport. Belgium could not take the lead as it lacks the resources to set up a

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headquarters. The Belgian parliament would also be hesitant to vote for a Belgian-led mission for historical and political reasons, but apparently most assume it would support Belgian participation in a larger European force.

15. (C) Vincent Mertens de Wilmars, Director of the Diplomatic Department at the MOD, was less optimistic about the chances for a European bridging force, especially after statements issued on December 12 by French President Sarkozy that the troops are not needed and the job would better be done by Africans themselves. De Wilmars said that the EU Commissioner for Development, Belgian Louis Michel, may have had an influence on the EU position. Michel is in the Congo and has been bitterly opposed to De Gucht's approach to Congo policy. De Wilmars admitted the EU decision is based on more than internal Belgian politics, however. MOD Peter De Crem had stated publicly on December 10 that Belgium could deploy 400-500 troops as part of a bridging force. However, De Wilmars told Poloff that even though the Belgian cabinet had agreed to find funds for such a venture, it was contingent on the standing up of a European mission, which he sees as less than likely after Sarkozy's statement.

Comment

16. (C) The Belgian MFA was more optimistic about an EU bridging force the morning of December 12 than they had been previously. The internal readout of where various countries stood was interesting, and the MFA thought that opposition from key member states could be overcome in the next few weeks. The MOD's recent statements that Belgium could provide 400-500 combat troops and find funding if an ESDP force is deployed was also positive, and counteracted earlier suspicions that the MFA and MOD were moving in opposite directions. French President Sarkozy's strong statement opposed to a European deployment the afternoon of December 12 reduced MOD optimism. The Belgians maintain they will not lead a mission and will only contribute troops if another EU country leads. It is certain FM De Gucht will push again in European channels, with the goal of preventing German, UK, and now French vetoes of a mission if other countries will go

along.

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